

Draft Environmental Assessment

Upper Missouri Watershed Beaver Relocation Project



August 2010



MEPA/NEPA/HB495 CHECKLIST

PART I. PROPOSED ACTION DESCRIPTION

1. Type of Proposed State Action

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) proposes the relocation of live beaver (*Castor Canadensis*) from the Upper Missouri River drainage to a location in the Elkhorn Mountains to reestablish extirpated populations and restore wetlands in the watershed to enhance wildlife habitat and surface water availability.

2. Agency Authority for the Proposed Action

Montana statute section 87-1-201, Montana Code Annotated (MCA), authorizes the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission to set the policies for the protection, preservation, and propagation of the wildlife, fish, game, furbearers, waterfowl, nongame species, and endangered species of the state 87-1-201 MCA. Within the policies established by the Commission, FWP is responsible for supervising the management and public use of all the wildlife, fish, game, furbearing animals, and game and nongame birds of the state.

Per 87-1-224 MCA, FWP has the authority to remove beaver by trapping or transplanting for the protection of public health.

3. Estimated Timeline:

Estimated Commencement Date: September 20, 2010

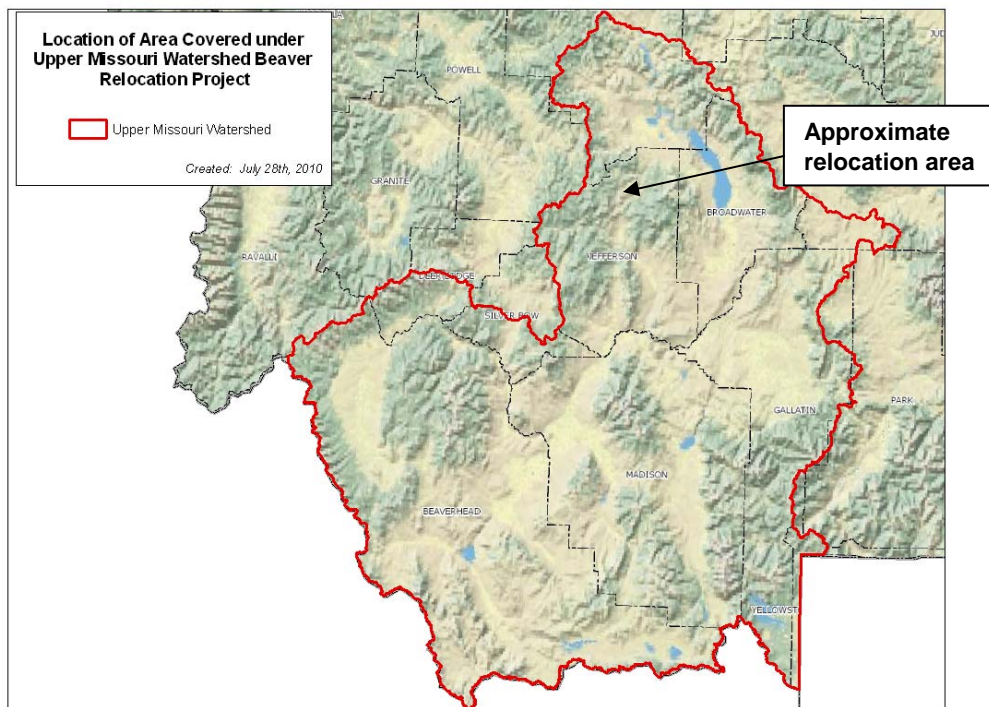
Anticipated Completion of Project: September 30, 2010

4. Location Affected by Proposed Action (county, range and township)

Relocation area: Private in-holding within U.S. Forest Service lands – Legal description - T8N R2W S5 (146 acres)

Removal areas: Portions of Beaverhead, Madison, Gallatin, Deer Lodge, Silver Bow, Jefferson, Lewis & Clark, Meagher, and Broadwater Counties, which constitute the headwaters of the Missouri River in Montana.

Map showing location and boundaries of the area that would be affected by the proposed action:



5. Project Size: Estimate the number of acres that would be directly affected that are currently:

	<u>Acres</u>		<u>Acres</u>
(a) Developed:		(d) Floodplain	<u>0</u>
Residential	<u>0</u>		
Industrial	<u>0</u>	(e) Productive:	
(existing shop area)		Irrigated cropland	<u>0</u>
(b) Open Space/	<u>0</u>	Dry cropland	<u>0</u>
Woodlands/Recreation		Forestry	<u>0</u>
(c) Wetlands/Riparian	<u>20 (max.)</u>	Rangeland	<u>0</u>
Areas		Other	<u>0</u>

6. Listing of any other Local, State or Federal agency that has overlapping or additional jurisdiction.

- (a) Permits: None required
- (b) Funding: ~\$500, FWP Game Damage
- (c) Other Overlapping or Additional Jurisdictional Responsibilities:
Prickly Pear Land Trust Conservation Easement

7. Narrative summary of the proposed action:

The proposed action is to relocate beavers to currently unoccupied drainages that have suitable habitat for long-term maintenance of those populations.

Background: In November 2009, FWP Region 3 was contacted by a landowner about restoration of wetlands on her property in the Strawberry Lookout area of the Elkhorn Mountains. An initial site visit was conducted by FWP's Montana Wetlands Legacy Partnership Coordinator in the spring of 2010. Subsequent site visit was arranged with the owner plus a botanist from Montana Natural Heritage Program, a representative from DEQ Abandoned Mines Bureau, and Wetland Program specialist with Montana DEQ. All concurred that the site is suitable for restoration of a beaver colony.

The 146-acre property had ample surface water with evidence of a number of relict beaver dams and lodges. Willows, aspen, and cottonwood on the property provide ample food to sustain a beaver colony. Although there is evidence of mining activity on the property in the late 1800s, there was no concern raised about water quality or contamination. A commitment was made to the landowner to investigate options for obtaining live beaver for release into Maupin Creek, which runs through the property.

The target property is under conservation easement with the Prickly Pear Land Trust. Terms of the conservation easement do not prohibit the reintroduction of beaver to the property.

FWP Region 3 personnel were contacted to discover if nuisance beaver were available to trap and transplant. There were beaver located and no more than 15 miles of the target property.

Proposal: Live-trap adult beaver in the Upper Missouri watershed (waters within the drainage area of Prickly Pear Creek and other tributaries draining the northern Elkhorn Mountains) and relocate them to the target Elkhorn property.

Number of animals to be moved would be 2-4 depending on the number of adult and subadult beavers that could be trapped from one existing colony to constitute the new colony.

Timing would be early fall, 2010 to allow sufficient time for the beaver to fortify relict dams, build bank den(s) or a lodge, and create a food cache.

All trapping and translocation would be accomplished by FWP Region 3 Wildlife and Enforcement personnel and/or FWP volunteers recruited for the purpose. Efforts would be made to minimize time and travel invested by FWP personnel to capture and move the beaver and to ensure that the "source" beaver come from the same watershed as the relocation area to minimize likelihood of translocation of diseases or parasites from a watershed where they occur to one where they do not.

FWP would monitor the beaver for at least 2 years after the introduction to see if their relocation and the restoration of wetlands were successful.

8. Alternatives to the Proposed Action:

- A. **No action alternative; No relocation of beaver in the proposed area.** This alternative has the potential to result in fewer human-beaver conflicts than the proposed action. It would also continue to limit the ability of beaver to naturally restore and maintain healthy wetlands, streams, and riparian areas as a central part of the animal community that historically maintained these areas and their vegetative communities on the landscape.
- B. **Minimize or remove beaver populations through aggressive lethal removal.** This alternative has the potential to remove beaver from the proposed area and therein, eliminate all human/beaver interaction and associated problems with flooding, loss of ornamental trees, etc. Removal of nuisance beaver from the entire proposal area (Prickly Pear Creek and other tributaries draining the northern Elkhorn Mountains) would involve a long-term investment of public funds for a period of years but likely could be accomplished. The costs to the watershed, to fisheries, and to the aesthetics of the proposal area could be noticeable since beaver ponds provide a wide variety of habitat for both fish and wildlife species as each colony can provide up to 20 acres of aquatic habitat (includes ponds, dams, and associated wetlands).
- C. **Relocation of nuisance beaver with intensive management and monitoring.** This alternative would involve relocation of beaver only into areas where FWP and partner agencies and organizations could monitor their activities, distribution, abundance, and movement within the Upper Missouri River drainage. Where beaver were found to have reached carrying capacity for the relocation area and are demonstrating a tendency to move to other areas, beaver could be lethally controlled or live-trapped to move to other suitable areas. This alternative would involve the long-term commitment of time, travel, and human resources to accomplish by all interested parties since beaver live traps need to be checked every day and it may take weeks to capture all of the beaver.

PART II. ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

Evaluation of the impacts of the **proposed action** including secondary and cumulative impacts on the physical and human environment.

A. PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

1. <u>LAND RESOURCES</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT*				Can Impact Be Mitigated*	Comment Index
	Unknown *	None	Minor*	Potentially Significant		
a. ** Soil instability or changes in geologic substructure?		X				
b. Disruption, displacement, erosion, compaction, moisture loss, or over-covering of soil, which would reduce productivity or fertility?		X				
c. **Destruction, covering or modification of any unique geologic or physical features?		X				
d. Changes in siltation, deposition or erosion patterns that may modify the channel of a river or stream or the bed or shore of a lake?			X		No	1d
e. Exposure of people or property to earthquakes, landslides, ground failure, or other natural hazard?		X				

1d. Beaver colonies established as a result of this relocation effort would place dams in streams that would create beaver ponds. Typically a beaver colony would have multiple dams with impounding ponds that could be an acre in size. These beaver ponds would serve as catchment basins for silt, clay, and other contaminants in the water, thereby improving land conservation by maintaining soil and limiting erosion is causing it to enter the waterway.

2. <u>AIR</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT*				Can Impact Be Mitigated*	Comment Index
	Unknown *	None	Minor*	Potentially Significant		
a. **Emission of air pollutants or deterioration of ambient air quality? (also see 13 (c))		X				
b. Creation of objectionable odors?		X				
c. Alteration of air movement, moisture, or temperature patterns or any change in climate, either locally or regionally?		X				
d. Adverse effects on vegetation, including crops, due to increased emissions of pollutants?		X				
e. **For P-R/D-J projects, will the project result in any discharge, which will conflict with federal or state air quality regs? (Also see 2a)		N/A				

The proposed relocation of 2-4 beaver to a location in the Elkhorn Mountains would not affect ambient air quality.

3. <u>WATER</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT*				Can Impact Be Mitigated*	Comment Index
	Unknown *	None	Minor*	Potentially Significant		
a.* Discharge into surface water or any alteration of surface water quality including but not limited to temperature, dissolved oxygen or turbidity?			X			3a
b. Changes in drainage patterns or the rate and amount of surface runoff?			X			3b
c. Alteration of the course or magnitude of floodwater or other flows?			X			3c
d. Changes in the amount of surface water in any water body or creation of a new water body?			X			3d
e. Exposure of people or property to water related hazards such as flooding?		X				
f. Changes in the quality of groundwater?			X			3f
g. Changes in the quantity of groundwater?			X			3g
h. Increase in risk of contamination of surface or groundwater?		X				
i. Effects on any existing water right or reservation?		X				
j. Effects on other water users as a result of any alteration in surface or groundwater quality?			X			3j
k. Effects on other users as a result of any alteration in surface or groundwater quantity?			X			3k
l.****For P-R/D-J, will the project affect a designated floodplain? (Also see 3c)		N/A				
m.*** For P-R/D-J, will the project result in any discharge that will affect federal or state water quality regulations? (Also see 3a)		N/A				

3a/d. Water retained in beaver ponds when discharged into the stream on which the dams are built would potentially be slightly warmer than the water that would be in the stream without dams in it. Because the amount of water discharged at any one time would equal inflow into the beaver pond, with the mixing that is occurring with the flowing water into the pond, the degree of temperature increase is expected to be minimal and not outside of state water quality standards for temperature.

3b/d. The presence of beaver dams and ponds in streams where they do not exist now would change surface runoff patterns to some degree as runoff fills the ponds as they are built and as water replaces evapotranspiration. Similarly, floodwaters would be affected by the beaver dams and ponds, attenuating some floodwaters and potentially spreading out the severity of flood peaks as they move down a stream channel.

3f/g. Beaver ponds would increase the amount of surface and subsurface water in the vicinity of the dams and beaver ponds, increase groundwater infiltration, provide more consistent discharge into watercourses from the ponds through the year, and improve water quality by serving as settling ponds for silt and other water-borne pollutants.

3j/k. Biological degradation of pollutants in the water of the beaver ponds while that water is there will improve the quality of surface water discharging from the ponds or infiltration into the subsurface or groundwater. While Montana Water Law

does not assign water rights to beaver ponds, water temporarily retained in beaver ponds can reduce flow in some watercourses for a brief period while beaver ponds fill. Once the ponds are full however, water does discharge, again available to downstream water users. More importantly, water infiltrating into riparian and floodplain areas will discharge out of those areas into streams to become physically available to downstream water users throughout the normal period of use of that water. Infiltration into groundwater of floodplain areas likewise increase the likelihood that wells will maintain water level and physical water availability to water users.

4. <u>VEGETATION</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT*				Can Impact Be Mitigated*	Comment Index
	Unknown	None	Minor*	Potentially Significant		
a. Changes in the diversity, productivity or abundance of plant species (including trees, shrubs, grass, crops, and aquatic plants)?			X			4a
b. Alteration of a plant community?			X			4b
c. Adverse effects on any unique, rare, threatened, or endangered species?	X					4c
d. Reduction in acreage or productivity of any agricultural land?			X		Yes	4d
e. Establishment or spread of noxious weeds?		X				
f.**** For P-R/D-J, will the project affect wetlands, or prime and unique farmland?		N/A				

4a/b/c. Wetlands, rewetted stream perimeters, and floodplain lands would all increase as a result of having more beaver in the proposed area, the result of relocation efforts. This would in turn increase diversity, productivity, and abundance of plants due to the presence of water in the soil in these areas. A beaver colony could have multiple dams that would increase water surface area (ponds) and raise the water table in a localized area. These changes could cover up to 20 acres surrounding the dam / pond area, which is less than 14% of the entire property. The exact amount of land that could be affected by the establishment of a beaver pond on Maupin Creek is unknown. Some existing aspen, willow, and young cottonwood trees may be harvested by the beaver in their construction of a dam and for food.

Local plant communities would potentially change from upland communities to wetland communities, which produce more biomass per acre than uplands again due to the greater availability of water in communities where beaver exist. All of the federally listed plants in Montana are wetland obligate plants, so it is possible that more beaver and more wetland or wet areas could improve the status of these species. There is only one federally listed species in Jefferson County, Ute Ladies' Tresses (*Spiranthes diluvialis*).

Overall, the diversity of plant species throughout the target property and the Maupin Creek drainage is not expected to change.

4d. Some areas near beaver dams could result in agricultural land no longer being farmable due to the wet nature of the soil. In those areas, the FWP would assist landowners with kill permits to remove beaver or to contact local fur trappers to remove beaver to eradicate the problem colony and flooding problem.

** 5. FISH/WILDLIFE Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT*				Can Impact Be Mitigated*	Comment Index
	Unknown	None	Minor*	Potentially Significant		
a. Deterioration of critical fish or wildlife habitat?		X				5a
b. Changes in the diversity or abundance of game animals or bird species?			X			5b
c. Changes in the diversity or abundance of nongame species?			X			5c
d. Introduction of new species into an area?		X				
e. Creation of a barrier to the migration or movement of animals?			X			5e
f. Adverse effects on any unique, rare, threatened, or endangered species?		X				5f
g. Increase conditions that stress wildlife populations or limit abundance (including harassment, legal or illegal harvest or other human activity)?		X				
h.*** For P-R/D-J, will the project be performed in any area in which T&E species are present, and will the project affect any T&E species or their habitat? (Also see 5f)		N/A				
i.*** For P-R/D-J, will the project introduce or export any species not presently or historically occurring in the receiving location? (Also see 5d)		N/A				

5a/b/c/f. Reintroducing beaver into suitable habitats essentially represents restoring them to areas they historically inhabited. This would improve wetland, stream, and floodplain habitat, which is critical habitat to many species of invertebrates, birds, amphibians, reptiles, fish, and mammals that utilize water, wetlands, streams, and riparian areas to complete some portion of their life cycle. A beaver colony could have multiple dams that would increase water surface area (ponds) and raise the water table in a localized area. These changes may cover up to 20 acres surrounding the dam / pond area, which could displace some small burrowing mammals.

5e/f. A beaver dam blocking the stream bed could cause a barrier to some species of fish that are not strong jumpers or migrate up the stream to spawn. The westslope cutthroat trout (USFWS listed species and MT species of concern) is known to use the upper reaches of McClellan Creek, which is downstream of Maupin Creek. It is unknown if westslope cutthroat trout use Maupin Creek or not. Brook trout likely reside in Maupin Creek.

5f. Beaver pond areas are documented to have higher levels of wildlife abundance and diversity, including for nongame species, than nearby uplands in most cases. Threatened or endangered fish and wildlife as well as species of concern would benefit from beaver being restored to suitable habitats as these areas are where these communities of animals evolved together and coexisted in the ecosystem in balance historically. Threatened, endangered, and species of concern in the vicinity of the target property are grey wolf, wolverine, and Canada lynx.

B. HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

6. <u>NOISE/ELECTRICAL EFFECTS</u>	IMPACT ⁺				Can Impact Be Mitigated ⁺	Comment Index
	Unknown ⁺	None	Minor ⁺	Potentially Significant		
Will the proposed action result in:						
a. Increases in existing noise levels?		X				
b. Exposure of people to severe or nuisance noise levels?		X				
c. Creation of electrostatic or electromagnetic effects that could be detrimental to human health or property?		X				
d. Interference with radio or television reception and operation?		X				

The proposed relocation of 2-4 beaver to a location in the Elkhorn Mountains would not affect existing noise levels.

7. <u>LAND USE</u>	IMPACT ⁺				Can Impact Be Mitigated ⁺	Comment Index
	Unknown ⁺	None	Minor ⁺	Potentially Significant		
Will the proposed action result in:						
a. Alteration of or interference with the productivity or profitability of the existing land use of an area?			X		Yes	7a
b. Conflict with a designated natural area or area of unusual scientific or educational importance?		X				
c. Conflict with any existing land use whose presence would constrain or potentially prohibit the proposed action?		X				
d. Adverse effects on or relocation of residences?	X				Yes	7d

7a/d. Increased water area and subsurface water tables would in some cases result in conditions near streams and beaver ponds where land use would be affected. This could include land near these streams being too wet to farm, cut hay, or graze in some cases. The extent of this potential impact on an acreage basis is unknown. However, as stated above, affected landowners and others concerned about these impacts currently have and would continue to have recourse wherein beaver kill permits may be issued to remove problem beaver and their structures.

8. <u>RISK/HEALTH HAZARDS</u>	IMPACT ⁺				Can Impact Be Mitigated ⁺	Comment Index
	Unknown ⁺	None	Minor ⁺	Potentially Significant		
Will the proposed action result in:						
a. Risk of an explosion or release of hazardous substances (including, but not limited to oil, pesticides, chemicals, or radiation) in the event of an accident or other forms of disruption?		X				
b. Affect an existing emergency response or emergency evacuation plan or create a need for a new plan?		X				
c. Creation of any human health hazard or potential hazard?	X					8c
d. ***For P-R/D-J, will any chemical toxicants be used? (Also see 8a)		N/A				

8c. Beaver are known to carry a number of diseases and parasites that pose a potential health threat to humans. However, beaver are found throughout the proposal area and their effects on human health or the degree to which they constitute a health risk or hazard is unknown. Due to the fact that beaver are naturally highly mobile and are believed to have inhabited all suitable habitats in the proposal area historically, their relocation back to some of the watercourses where they previously occurred does not represent the introduction of a new species. It also does not represent introduction of new parasites and diseases that do not occur in the proposal area now as beaver to be relocated would be taken from the proposal area and moved live into another part of the same watershed.

No other private land adjoins the target property where beaver could cause the neighbors problems with flooding, etc.

9. <u>COMMUNITY IMPACT</u>	IMPACT ⁺				Can Impact Be Mitigated ⁺	Comment Index
	Unknown ⁺	None	Minor ⁺	Potentially Significant		
Will the proposed action result in:						
a. Alteration of the location, distribution, density, or growth rate of the human population of an area?		X				
b. Alteration of the social structure of a community?		X				
c. Alteration of the level or distribution of employment or community or personal income?			X		Yes	9c
d. Changes in industrial or commercial activity?		X				
e. Increased traffic hazards or effects on existing transportation facilities or patterns of movement of people and goods?		X				

9c. Personal income could be temporarily affected where beaver dams created flooding that affected crops or grazing land adjacent to beaver dams. Remediation of that temporary loss is proposed through removal of the beaver colonies causing those problems. It should also be pointed out that in the case of haying and grazing, increased grass production at some distance from the beaver ponds resulting from the higher water table has the potential to increase forage availability during some times of the year. Although, regional staff may request that the Fish, Wildlife & Parks Commission implement a temporary closure in the immediate area of the beaver release until the colony becomes established, the beaver trapping that follows can represent income for beaver trappers that they would not otherwise have. Trapping may be conducted by licensed trappers throughout the proposal area so potentially higher numbers of beaver in the watershed could represent more income for trappers.

10. PUBLIC SERVICES/TAXES/UTILITIES	IMPACT ⁺				Can Impact Be Mitigated ⁺	Comment Index
	Unknown *	None	Minor*	Potentially Significant		
Will the proposed action result in:						
a. Will the proposed action have an effect upon or result in a need for new or altered governmental services in any of the following areas: fire or police protection, schools, parks/recreational facilities, roads or other public maintenance, water supply, sewer or septic systems, solid waste disposal, health, or other governmental services? If any, specify: _____			X		Yes	10a
b. Will the proposed action have an effect upon the local or state tax base and revenues?		X				
c. Will the proposed action result in a need for new facilities or substantial alterations of any of the following utilities: electric power, natural gas, other fuel supply or distribution systems, or communications?		X				
d. Will the proposed action result in increased used of any energy source?		X				
e.** Define projected revenue sources						
f.** Define projected maintenance costs.						

10a. Where beaver colonies and dams occur along private and public roads, there is a likelihood that greater road maintenance would be needed. Beaver dams along highways and railroad tracks can create beaver ponds that represent a hazard to public roadways, rights of way, and impact services provided by those roads. Flooding of this kind is common in many parts of the watershed now as a result of having beaver in those areas. It is possible that more flooding will result, increasing the need for more beaver removal and repair or maintenance of roads, culverts, and related structures. In those areas, FWP would assist landowners with kill permits to remove beaver or to contact local fur trappers to remove beaver to eradicate the problem colony and flooding problem.

** 11. AESTHETICS/RECREATION	IMPACT ⁺				Can Impact Be Mitigated ⁺	Comment Index
	Unknown ⁺	None	Minor ⁺	Potentially Significant		
Will the proposed action result in:						
a. Alteration of any scenic vista or creation of an aesthetically offensive site or effect that is open to public view?			X			11a
b. Alteration of the aesthetic character of a community or neighborhood?			X			11b
c.** Alteration of the quality or quantity of recreational/tourism opportunities and settings? (Attach Tourism Report)			X			11c
d.*** For P-R/D-J, will any designated or proposed wild or scenic rivers, trails or wilderness areas be impacted?		N/A				

11a/b/c. Beaver colonies, their dams, and ponds greatly enhance the aesthetic qualities of areas where they occur by providing open water areas that attract wildlife, reflect blue skies, surrounding trees, hills, and mountains, and provide green space where recreation opportunities are great. Fishing, trapping, wildlife viewing, photography, hiking, biking, and other recreational pursuits in watersheds where surface water is more abundant is experienced throughout the proposal area now. More beaver and more beaver ponds would create an anticipated increase in these aesthetics and recreational benefits. A beaver colony could have multiple dams that would increase water surface area (ponds) and raise the water table in a localized area. These changes may cover up to 20 acres surrounding the dam / pond area.

12. CULTURAL/HISTORICAL RESOURCES	IMPACT ⁺				Can Impact Be Mitigated ⁺	Comment Index
	Unknown ⁺	None	Minor ⁺	Potentially Significant		
Will the proposed action result in:						
a.** Destruction or alteration of any site, structure or object of prehistoric historic, or paleontological importance?	X					12a
b. Physical change that would affect unique cultural values?	X					12b
c. Effects on existing religious or sacred uses of a site or area?	X					12c
d.**** For P-R/D-J, will the project affect historic or cultural resources? Attach SHPO letter of clearance. (Also see 12.a)		N/A				

12a/b/c. Where Native American and other historical uses of a site along a stream, river, wetland, riparian area, or floodplain are inundated by beaver activity, there is a potential impact to cultural sites. The degree of the potential impact is unknown as there is no known way to predict what areas beaver will inhabit either naturally or through relocation activities. And while it is not proposed to place beaver in areas where such impacts would be known in advance to occur, this does not guarantee that relocated beaver would not subsequently inhabit such areas. Again, because beaver historically inhabited all or most suitable habitats in the proposal area, it is not expected that relocating them into these historically inhabited sites would destroy, deface, or otherwise significantly diminish cultural resources.

13. SUMMARY EVALUATION OF SIGNIFICANCE	IMPACT ⁺				Can Impact Be Mitigated ⁺	Comment Index
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Will the proposed action, considered as a whole:	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant		
a. Have impacts that are individually limited, but cumulatively considerable? (A project or program may result in impacts on two or more separate resources, which create a significant effect when considered together or in total.)						13a
b. Involve potential risks or adverse effects which are uncertain but extremely hazardous if they were to occur?		X				
c. Potentially conflict with the substantive requirements of any local, state, or federal law, regulation, standard or formal plan?		X				
d. Establish a precedent or likelihood that future actions with significant environmental impacts will be proposed?		X				
e. Generate substantial debate or controversy about the nature of the impacts that would be created?			X			13d
f.*** For P-R/D-J, is the project expected to have organized opposition or generate substantial public controversy? (Also see 13e)		N/A				
g.**** For P-R/D-J, list any federal or state permits required.		N/A				

13a. The relocation of beaver to the Maupin Creek drainage would likely alter the creek's speed and temperature, the types of vegetation near the creek after a dam is established, downstream water quality, and habitat for species dependent upon wetlands. FWP considers all these changes to the existing local environment as positive influences because beaver have historically been in the creek and their actions have previously influenced the creek's flow and local vegetation.

13e. The effects of beaver on human infrastructure, agricultural production, and other human activities are well known by Montana residents. An unknown number of Montanans and Montana visitors may prefer that beaver were less numerous than is currently the case, rather than more numerous. It is expected that farmers and ranchers, road and transportation infrastructure companies and agencies, and others would object to relocation of beaver into previously inhabited areas.

FWP would strive to relocate beaver to areas where they would produce little or no impact on private lands, agriculture, transportation infrastructure, and other known areas of conflict with human activity. This does not preclude the beavers' innate ability to migrate into other areas than where released to potentially create impacts there. In summary however, the benefits to Montana of increased distribution of beaver in historically inhabited areas would likewise increase availability of surface and groundwater in those areas. The societal benefits of increased water availability and the enhances to recreation, aesthetics, and other benefits, merit consideration of this proposal despite the potential cumulative negative impact of having more beaver colonies affecting more human activities in more areas.

Evaluation and listing of mitigation, stipulation, or other control measures enforceable by the agency or another government agency:

Montana FWP has complete legal authority to trap, transplant, and lethally control beaver per Montana Statutes and Regulations of the FWP Commission. Wherever beaver occur and create a significant conflict with human activities or uses of an area, FWP can remove these beaver. However, the cost and personnel time to conduct this level of surveillance, monitoring, and removal in an area the size of the proposed area is cost prohibitive for the agency. As a result, FWP will call upon partner agencies, conservation organization, recreationists including fur trappers, and others to assist the Department in maintaining beaver on the landscape while working to manage negative impacts at a level that is acceptable to the majority of the public.

PART III. NARRATIVE EVALUATION AND COMMENT

The general distribution of beaver is throughout Montana. However, their relative density within northern Jefferson County fairly sparse per observation data collected by the Montana Heritage Program. The proposed project would reestablish extirpated beaver populations and restore wetlands in the Elkhorn Mountain in order to enhance wildlife habitat and surface water availability for aquatic species.

Beaver have historically lived and used the Maupin Creek drainage. The relocation of beaver to the drainage would change the existing vegetation adjacent to the creek and improve water conditions for the benefit of aquatic and terrestrial species by reestablishing a wetland community. Riparian and wetland communities support the highest concentration of plants and animals in Montana. In Montana, riparian habitats provide breeding and nesting areas for at least 134 (55%) of Montana's 245 species of breeding birds, as well as much-needed food and resting areas for migrating birds. There are 17 Tier I Species of Greatest Conservation Need that rely on riparian and wetland habitat for breeding and/or survival.

Although, the potential change of the local area from a predominately upland plant community (grasses and sage) to a wetland community may be considered a major change to some, the chosen location has historically been used by beaver and was likely at one time in the past a wetland. If successful, the reestablishment of a beaver population on Maupin Creek is likely to improve water quality and habitat for aquatic species and provide terrestrial species with increased forage and habitat in the years to come.

PART IV. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

1. Public involvement:

The public will be notified in the following manners to comment on this current EA, the proposed action and alternatives:

- Two public notices in each of these papers: *Helena Independent Record* and *Jefferson County Courier*;
- Copies of this environmental assessment will be distributed to the neighboring landowners and interested parties to ensure their knowledge of the proposed project; and

- Public notice on the Fish, Wildlife & Parks web page: <http://fwp.mt.gov>.

This level of public notice and participation is appropriate for a project of this scope.

2. Duration of comment period:

The public comment period will extend for (15) fifteen days following the publication of the second legal notice in area newspapers. Written comments will be accepted until 5:00 p.m., August 31, 2010 and can be mailed to the address below:

Upper Missouri Watershed Beaver Relocation Project
Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
1400 South 19th Ave.
Bozeman, MT 59718

or thin@mt.gov

PART V. EA PREPARATION

1. Based on the significance criteria evaluated in this EA, is an EIS required? (YES/NO)? No

If an EIS is not required, explain why the EA is the appropriate level of analysis for this proposed action.

Based on an evaluation of impacts to the physical and human environment under MEPA, this environmental review revealed no significant impacts from the proposed action. Potential influences to the environment, if the project is initiated, are expected to be in a limited area and possible negative impacts to the human environment can be mitigated. Therefore, an EIS is not necessary, and an environmental assessment is the appropriate level of analysis.

2. List of agencies consulted during preparation of the EA:

Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Montana Department of Environmental Quality
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

3. Persons responsible for preparing the EA:

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